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Le Carre Stays on Top

By Geoffrey Wolff

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JOHN LE CARRE'S new story is too good to be revealed. It is a novel, like "The Spy Who Came in From the Cold," of misapprehensions and reversals. Jumping from riddle to riddle it leads you where you are surprised to be led. It is, then, in the strictest sense, a mystery novel.

Its mystery is not like that of the "Oedipus Tyrannus," in which the clues are right before your eyes from the outset, waiting to be understood. "A Small Town in Germany" gets its energy from hidden snips of information, gradually revealed, which paste together to produce an intricate quilt of logic, impeccable in its symmetry.

THE STORY is set in contemporary Bonn. An employe of the British embassy there has disappeared, taking with him an important, and most secret, file. His timing is peculiarly unfortunate. The British are trying to gain admission to the Common Market; they need Germany's support; the file contains information that might ruin the careers of several German politicians.

Alan Turner, the hero of the story and a professional investigator, is sent from London to Bonn to find the file and the man who stole it, Leo Harting. He is to find them in that order.

He arrives in Bonn to find Germany on the edge of violent disruption. A new party, the "Movement," is forming under the direction of a demagogue of savagely effective capacity. The Movement is antidemocratic, vaguely neo-Nazi, fiercely nationalistic and anti-British. British policy toward it is one of appeasement. The embassy is anxious not to antagonize any potential cluster of power along the German political spectrum.

Turner is rude and brutal. He has an unsavory past, is bitter and ruthless, has been badly used by his wife, is ill-suited for delicate negotiations. He is shoved down the throat of Her Majesty's Foreign Office.

Turner is a hunter. He sets out to track and capture Harting, who had worked for the embassy since the end of the war. A German who once dabbled in communism, Harting had fled to England soon after Hitler came to power.

But the essential fact about Harting is that no one seems to know anything about him. He had easy access to restricted information but his past had never been properly investigated. When Turner asks why, he is told "you

didn't ask about his background really; you never knew what you might hear."

SO TURNER starts digging. He is trying to peel back the veneer of a thief and a spy and a traitor. He interviews and bullies each member of the embassy staff, and from each learns one or two secrets that gradually reveal the shape of a grimy little man, weary and bitter and deceitful.

His political motives continue to remain hidden but Harting's personal involvements crisscross the lives of embassy employes in improbable patterns that finally begin to assume coherence. Of capital interest to Turner is the fact that while no one understands Harting, the missing quarry had great power over the people he met. Because the spy's power was gathered in tiny portions from here and there, he was able to conceal it.

Gradually Turner becomes obsessed with the object of his search: "I'll chase you, you chase me, and each of us will chase ourselves." Finally, obsession itself becomes the subject of the novel and once this is understood, all its fragmented parts slip into place.

SO MUCH can be told without disclosing the story's secrets. It might also be said that Le Carre continues to write very well, if somewhat too self-consciously well. He wants badly to create an atmosphere of shabbiness for his spies to work within. Le Carre is so anxious to avoid the romantic posturings of Ian Fleming that he makes Turner almost too grubby to believe, as James Bond was too glossy to believe. Turner is repellent to women, and careless about food. He is understood to change his shirts rather too infrequently.

And Le Carre is very rough on the Germans. If he doesn't create villains born for melodrama, he is still too ready to make all Germans look like a compound of rascality, stupidity, barbarism and blind obedience. His Englishmen tend to be too correct and too lethargic. Nonetheless, within these minor limitations on the believability of his creatures, he is the best spy novelist we have.

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Book Review

'A Small Town in Germany'

By John le Carré (Coward-McCann, 383 pp., \$6.95).